Empowering organizations: revealing their perceptions to adapt support programs

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Introduction

The implementation of economical liberalization policies led to important changes in the agricultural sector and challenged the survival of many agricultural producers. In this situation, both empirical and theoretical literature insist on the role producers'organizations can play to guarantee producers' acess to markets. As a result, these organizations are receiving support from both private and public actors. However, producers' organizations do not all have the same needs facing liberalization, particularly because they do not share the same perceptions of liberalization's stakes. We argue that it would be important to adapt support programs to the perceptions of the organizations. The key issue of this paper is to answer the following question: Does knowing the perceptions of organizations enable to better support them? To answer this question, we rely on an empirical study carried out in Costa Rica that focus on producers' organizations (Maître D'Hôtel 2007). In section 1, we present the costarician context, and more particularly the way public programs aimed at strengthening producers' organizations have evolved in the last decades. Section 2 is a literature review on the way support programs, based on learning processes, have been conceived. Section 3 presents the methodology we used to characterize organizations' perceptions. Section 4 delivers the results of the empirical study led in terms of organizations' perceptions. Section 5 provides insights, on the basis of these results, on the way to adapt support programs to organizations's perceptions.

Context

In Costa Rica, the liberalization process has been implemented quite rapidly. Initiated in 1984 with the approval of the first structural adjustment plan, liberalization was reinforced in 1994 with the adhesion of Costa Rica to the World Trade Organization. Since the approval of the "*Agricultura de Cambio*" program in 1986, the Costarician State tends to withdraw from market regulation and to reduce markets' barriers. This period of liberalization corresponds to a change in the way public programs aimed at empowering producers' organizations have been conceived (Rodriguez and Maître D'Hôtel 2006).

During the 1970 and 1980 decades, the Costarician Ministry of Agriculture intervened on organizations, mainly through technical and financial programs. The objective of these programs was clearly an agricultural modernization (green revolution period) with positive results as in the case of coffee or dairy. Services supplied focused on technology transfer, and were basicaly made of research, technical assistance and credit. In most of the cases, these services were following a top-down logic.

Since the 1990 decade, public programs aimed at empowering producers' organizations have evolved a lot.

- First, in a context of further trade liberalization, they tend to foster subsectors oriented towards newly formed export markets, as for example pineapple. The public institutions' assistance is aiming at improving the competitiveness of the farmers and strengthening the managerial skills of organizations to deal with marketing issues. They disregard subsectors in relation with domestic markets (for example bean) and doesn't assist organizations strategies oriented to larger objectives (community development, support to family agriculture, etc.).
- Second, they still focus on technology transfer, but they are progressively becoming more participatory to adapt to the needs of farmers.
- Third, they evolve from assistance at farm level towards exclusive support to organizations providing credit for investments and technical assistance. They put in place capacity building actions aimed at the identification of critical gaps in organizations' functionning and, at the end, the construction of strategic plans by producers

Literature review

In the past 50 years, several types of systems have emerged to encourage learning of rural actors. We will distinguish two main types (Coudel, 2009).

- The first systems to be structured are the "extension systems" developed during the green revolution, mainly focused on knowledge and technology transfer. Although they adapted progressively to become less top-down, more participatory, such systems focusing mainly on knowledge transfer are still largely advocated by national and international institutions as they offer quite operational methods (Black 2000).
- Then, in the 1970s-1980s, developed as an alternative by NGOs, new systems emerged locally, generally focusing on local community development, encouraging exchange and innovation through networks. These systems were reinforced during the 1990s-2000 by national and international institutions, with "integrated community development" or "capacity building" programs. These approaches, that tend to enable different actors to develop new ways of thinking about development and decide what future they want for themselves have been qualified as social learning (Roling and Magemakers 1998).

This evolution in learning systems can be understood trough the framework of action-learning theory, that postulates that we learn through action, by correcting our errors, in a continual retroaction process (Argyris and Schon 1996).

- Learning in the common sense is qualified as single-loop learning: it occurs when new information is acquired and transformed individually or within a group with the aim of improving efficiency, for example by improving existing routines. This conception is central in extension systems.
- Another type of learning may be necessary in some blocked situations, within a double-loop learning process: through a group process, individuals must gain a new perception of issues and problems, leading to a new way of solving them, and to the

emergence of new values within the group. This is qualified as organizational learning[1], and is quite present in community learning systems.

These two types of learning processes occur simultaneously, in interaction, but depending on the situation and the priorities, one process will take the front. Within more recent learning systems, which put forward values and the importance of developing learning frameworks, instead of knowledge and technologies, the perception of the actors involved emerges as an important aspect, especially for adult learning (Knowles 1990). An adult has a psychological need to be recognized as self-directing. It is necessary to recognize his past experience and negotiate with him an education project to which he adheres and in which he sees an interest for his life (he will be all the more interested, in the contrary case, he will feel a tension which will lead him to resist). The trainer must encourage the learning process through specific methods.Therefore, to conceive an adequate training, it is important to build from the perceptions of the actors involved… but how is it possible to reveal these perceptions?

Method

To reveal organizations' perceptions, we lead a statistical analysis of textual data. In Costa Rica, we met the representatives of twelve organizations, involved in different agricultural subsectors (coffee, dairy, bean, pineapple). We interviewed them on the way they were perceiving the economical liberalization. Their answers have been fully re-transcripted before being analysed with the ALCESTE[2] lexicometric software.

The lexicometric approach, developped in the 1980s, relies on the hypothesis that the words used by actors reveal subjacent mental representations of the world (Reinert, 1986). The approach enables both (i) a quantitative definition of a lexical specificity, based on occurrence calculations and (ii) the production of qualitative structural information, based on co-occurrence calculations. The ALCESTE software relies on the Khi-square statistics and on hierarchical cluster analysis. It leads to the establishment of lexicometric classes. These classes are defined

- By representative words : occurence calculations, the quantitative test for a word to be representative of a class is a Khi-square statistics[3]
- By the way words are structurally associated : co-occurence calculations, words associations are mapped in hierarchical clusters.

The interpretation of these classes permits to characterize the prevailing mental perceptions. Even though the existence of significantly different classes and related words is purely statistic, their interpretation is the delicate part of the work, and has to be confronted to a deep knowledge on actors.

Results

The lexicometric analysis, applied to the discourses of representatives, identifies four different lexicometric classes, presented in Table 1 below. The figures into brackets correspond to the

[1] In recent years, several authors suggest that there is also a "triple-loop" process, that emerge from unstable collectives with heterogenous actors, and consist as challenging societal rules, innovating at a societal level, and introducing new frameworks to guide action. This triple-loop implies that actors are aware of the importance of developing common learning processes, and consciously reflect upon this learning.

[2] From french, meaning "Analysis of Co-occurring Lexemes in Simple Utterances of a Written Text"

[3] This Khi-square statistics is the probability to consider a word as representative of a class when it is not representative of this class (its representation in the texts of this class is not meaningful).

associated chi-square: the higher the chi-square, the higher the importance of the representative word in the constitution of the class. On the basis of the interpretation of each one of these classes, we distinguish three types of perceptions (see below):

- Type A, liberalization is perceived as an opportunity
- Type B, liberalization is perceived as a reality we have to face
- Type C, liberalization is perceived as a constraint

Table 1 : The lexicometric classes obtained by the textual analysis

	Representative words	Subsectors variables
Class 1	*Free (90), Negociate(69), Trade(69),Tariff(59), Policies(35), Defend(12)*	
Class 2	*Export(22), Pack(16), Try(14), Pay (13), Cost(13),Contract(13), Agreement(9)*	Pineapple (128)
Class 3	*Develop(27), Can(16), Say(16), Transform(16), Think(7)*	Dairy (66), Coffee (27)
Class 4	*State(18), Withdraw(17), Help(9), Fight(9), Decide(8)*	Bean sector(144)

The fact that none of the subsector variables is located in the class 1 indicates that this class corresponds to a "common field of perception": globaly, actors refer in their discurses to public policies, that are addressed through measures (*policies, tariff, free trade agreement*) and actions (*negociate, defend*).

The three other classes can be interpreted as three different types of perceptions.

- In class 2, liberalization seems fully accepted by organizations (Type A). Attention is concentrated on market coordination, that is addressed through actions (*export, pack, try, pay)* and through measures (*agreement, contract, cost*).
- In class 3, liberalization is integrated by organizations as a reality, and even if they do not fully adhere to it, they can react to it directly (Type B). Organizations focus on the importance of organizations' play, by their role in the development of sectors (*can, develop*) and by the actions they lead (*say, transform, think*).
- In class 4, liberalization is perceived by organizations as a constraint, and is somehow rejected (Type C, utopist rejection). Organizations strongly refer to State coordination, and more exactly to State withdrawal, that is denunced and responsible for economical difficulties (*fight, problems*).

Discussion

These results suggest that programs aimed at empowering organizations have to be devised differently depending on organization's perceptions.

- In the case of organizations of Type A, support programs based on technical assistance directly fit organizations'needs. Because organizations fully perceive liberalization's stakes, these programs can directly adress production, transformation, marketing and managerial issues. However, to better perform, they

have to rely on the recognition and exchange of experiences (embeddedness of the acquired knowledge in experiences). They rely on single loop learning[4].

- At the opposite, in the case of organizations of Type C, there is a need to work on values before working on technical capacities (double loop learning). Support programs have to concentrate first on the definition of organizations' strategical objectives. This process of definition is quite complex, it implies the rising up of (i) a common perception of organization's environment by members and (ii) a common perception of what the organization should and can by members. Obtaining this collective appropriation requires to foster auto-analysis capacities, that goes through the recognition of past experiences of both organizations' members and other organizations (Faure et al 2007).

In between, in the case of organizations of Type B, support programs may combine single loop learning processes (as in the case of Type A organizations, focusing on technical capacities) and double loop learning processes (as in the case of Type C organizations, focusing on values).

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[4] In cases there is a need to better define organizations' strategical objectives, a collective work on values could be necesary (double loop learning)